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Homer's *Odyssey* in the Hands of its Allegorists: Many Paths to Explain the Cosmos

Summary

The allegorical exegetic tradition was arguably the most popular form of literary criticism in antiquity. Amongst the ancient allegorists we encounter a variety of names and philosophical backgrounds spanning from Pherecydes of Syros to Proclus the Successor. Many of these writers believed that Homer's epics revealed philosophical doctrines through the means of *hyponoia* or 'undermeanings.' Within this tradition was a focus on cosmological, cosmogonical and theological matters which attracted a variety of commentators despite their philosophical backgrounds. It is the intention of this paper to draw attention to two writers: Heraclitus, and Porphyry of Tyre. This paper also intends to demonstrate that the tradition of cosmic allegorical exegesis is still practiced in modern scholarship.

Keywords: Homer; literary criticism; allegory; Heraclitus; Porphyry; cosmology; metaphor

Die allegorische exegetische Tradition war wohl die populärste Form der Literaturkritik in der Antike. Unter den antiken Allegorien begegnen wir einer Vielzahl von Namen und philosophischen Hintergründen, die von Pherecydes von Syros bis zu Proclus der Nachfolger reichen. Viele dieser Autoren glaubten, Homers Epen enthüllten philosophische Lehren durch Hyponoie oder ‚Unterschätzung‘. In dieser Tradition lag der Fokus auf kosmologischen, kosmogonischen und theologischen Fragen, die trotz ihrer philosophischen Hintergründe eine Vielzahl von Kommentatoren anzogen. Es ist die Absicht dieses Artikels, auf zwei Autoren aufmerksam zu machen: Heraklit und Porphyry von Tyrus. Das vorliegende Werk soll zudem zeigen, dass die Tradition der kosmischen allegorischen Exegese in der modernen Wissenschaft noch immer praktiziert wird.

Keywords: Homer; Literatur-Kritik; Allegorie; Heraclitus; Porphyry; Kosmologie; Metapher

1 Introduction

The idea that Homer composed allegorical works, and the associated practice of exegesis pursued by later philosophers and critics, were both prevalent by the end of the fifth century BCE and continued well into the late Roman and Byzantine periods.¹ Among the ancient allegorists we encounter a variety of names and philosophic backgrounds spanning from Pherecydes of Syros to Proclus the Successor. Many of these writers believed that Homer's epics, intentionally or not, revealed philosophical doctrines through the means of *hyponoia* or 'undermeanings'.² What is most striking about these accounts, despite differences in the authors' philosophical leanings or periods of practice, is the common practice of cosmic interpretation.³ It is the intention of this paper to draw attention to a few such writers – including the ancient grammarian Heraclitus and Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry of Tyre.⁴ However, this paper also intends to suggest that the tradition of cosmic allegorical exegesis is still practiced in modern scholarship, through an analysis of the works of Harvard Classics Professor Gregory Nagy.⁵ Through this brief survey, this paper intends to demonstrate, first, that when we speak of allegorical interpretations of Homer, what we often mean is cosmic allegory, and secondly, that these interpretations continue through current academic discourse.

2 Allegory

The inclusion of allegory as a poetic tool was attributed as early as the seventh century BCE to Archilochus and Alcaeus.⁶ As early as the sixth century the critical application of the allegorical exegesis to the works of the poets began with Pherecydes, and Theagenes of Rhegium.⁷ In this practice, "allegory is used to designate a range of non-literal expression from extended metaphors to maxims (*gnōmai*) to riddles."⁸ However, the exact prevalence of allegorical exegesis throughout antiquity is a contested topic. Some scholars would argue that it was an eccentricity, particularly of late antiquity, which can be

1 Bruns 1988; Lamberton and Keaney 1992; Browning 1992, 146; Lamberton and Keaney 1992, xiii, xvi, xxiii; Struck 2004, 5, 18; Russell and Konstan 2005, xiii, xiv; Tzetzēs 2015.

2 Tate 1934, 107.

3 The terms 'philosophy' and 'science' are used throughout as a broad rubric to reflect an amalgam of what we would identify today as disparate disciplines – such as cosmology, physics, horology, theology, meteorology, cosmogony, medicine, and soteriology, to name a few – and even those we now consider pseudo-disciplines, such as astrology and

divination. 'Astronomy' is used to refer to specifically astrophysical phenomena.

4 Heraclitus Homeric Problems; Porph. *De antr. nymph.*

5 Nagy 1990a; Nagy 2013. Also see Frame 1978.

6 Heraclitus Homeric Problems 5.

7 Fragment DK 7 B5 (= Origen, *C. Cels.* vi, 42); fragment DK 8 A2 (= Porphyry, *Homeric Questions* i, 240, 14); Struck 2004, 26–27; Ford 2002, 69 n. 6; Kennedy 1990, 85 and MacPhail 2011, 240–241.

8 Ford 2002, 72.

“skipped over” by serious scholars of literary criticism to whom it can have “no possible redeeming interest.”⁹ This opinion seems to stem from a desire to obey Aristotelian parameters (to which allegorists do not comply despite the fact that the *Poetics* seems to demonstrate the exception, rather than the rule, regarding allegoresis in antiquity).¹⁰ A systematic survey of literary criticism in antiquity instead demonstrates that allegorical practices were not rare.¹¹ In defense of its popularity P. Struck remarks that “if during Plato’s time the Homeric professors were famous for textual criticism [or] grammatical commentary [...] we would expect to see these methods [...] caricatured [in comedy]”, rather than the allegorists, who were indeed lampooned by Aristophanes in *Peace*.¹²

While the number of allegorical interpreters through antiquity far exceeds¹³ the number of vocal allegorical adversaries, the weighty reputation of the latter creates the illusion of a disproportionate and more officious sense of disapproval.¹⁴ Yet, even the strongest adversaries could not avoid the odd exegesis in their own works. Aristotle is often cited as the primary antagonist of allegorical exegesis. The *Poetics* argues that *ainigma* is a flaw, and that good poets should always strive to ensure clarity within their works. His concerns therefore are aesthetic ones; he “side-steps allegorical reading(s)” for the sake of “clear language.”¹⁵ The fragments of Aristotle, however, reveal that he considered his own allegorical solutions to Homer. Fragment 175 concerns the oxen of Helios, to which the scholiasts report that “it was read as a physical allegory [by Aristotle]. The seven flocks of fifty cattle belonging to the sun was the mythical representation of the 350 [...] solar days of the lunar year.”¹⁶ Eustathius supported this interpretation, remarking that “they say Aristotle read these herds allegorically as the 350 days in the twelve lunar months.”¹⁷ G. W. Most has identified Fragment 175 as “a single apparent exception” and yet R. Lamberton has also identified Fragment 149 as an allegorical interpretation made by Aristotle.¹⁸ Aristotle’s interpretation concerned the apparent Homeric paradox that Helios can see all and hear all (*Il.* 3.277) and yet requires Lampetia to inform him of the destruction of his cattle (*Od.* 12.374–375), which he explains by arguing that Lampetia symbolically represents Helios’ sight.¹⁹ A final example can be found in *Metaphysics* 12.1074b whereby Aristotle interprets the inspired sayings of the ancient thinkers regarding the divine quality of the heavenly bodies.

9 Kennedy 1990, 78; Struck 2004, 6; Lamberton and Keaney 1992, xvi.

10 Struck 2004, 7, 51, 63–65.

11 Tate 1929, 142–154; Richardson 1975, 77–81; Ford 2002, 67–89; Struck 2004, 17–18.

12 Struck 2004, 43; *Peace* 38–51; it is also telling that allegorists do not appear among the defenders of Homer listed by Aristotle in his *Poetics* 1460b.

13 For a cursory list see Struck 2004, 5.

14 Cicero, Quintilian, and Balbus, for example, are

seen as “standard among allegorical commentators” in their opposition to it, Struck 2004, 115.

15 Lamberton and Keaney 1992, xiii; Richardson 1992, 30–40; Struck 2004, 51, 63–65.

16 Fragment 175 in Rose 1886.

17 F 175 R3 (= Eust. 1717 on Hom. *Od.* XII.130); Barnes 1984.

18 Most 2010, 26 n. 1; Lamberton and Keaney 1992, xiv–xv.

19 Fragment 149 in Rose 1886.

The same incongruity can also be found in Plato, another popular example of anti-allegorical thinking in antiquity. Socrates' censure of allegorical interpretation is presented in three arguments. First, he disapproved of the easy access to lofty philosophical truths made so easily available to the undereducated by allegorists.²⁰ He also remarks, rather contradictorily, that Homer's poems should not be allowed into the ideal city "whether they are allegorical or not" because the young are not able to distinguish it.²¹ Finally, he claims that one cannot assert the truth of an interpretation because the poet himself cannot be asked his intent.²² Plato/Socrates' objection therefore seems to stem from either elitist intellectual practice, or his more usual concerns regarding validity. However, these concerns did not prevent Plato from practicing,²³ and indeed commending,²⁴ allegorical exegesis in his own works. Cicero and Plutarch were also contradictory in their anti-allegorical stances. Cicero has Vellius accuse both Zeno and Chrysippus of twisting the meaning of fables in *On the Nature of the Gods*, and yet explains the mythical account of Uranus' castration as an intelligent rendering of physical phenomena in the same text.²⁵ Plutarch similarly rejects astrological and cosmic allegory as a method for defending Homer, and then makes use of allegorical methods in his other works.²⁶

Many of the ancient grammarians and philosophers who practiced allegorical exegesis proposed that Homer, intentionally or unintentionally, embedded allegory in his works for the purposes of education.²⁷ It was perceived, therefore, that authors like Homer contained within their words a gods-given authority on a range of subject matter. Tate explains the phenomena thus: "it [allegory] was practiced [by the philosophers] in order to make more explicit the doctrines which students of the poets believed to be actually contained within the poet's [i.e. Homer's] words."²⁸ These doctrines, of course, frequently reflected the writer's own philosophical bias, a practice that continued down to the Neoplatonists and could arguably be found in contemporary interpretations as well.²⁹

20 Pl. *Resp.* 378a; Pl. *Tht.* 180d.

21 Pl. *Resp.* 378d.

22 Pl. *Prt.* 347e–348a.

23 Pl. *Tht.* 153c–d, 180c–d; Pl. *Cra.* 398b–c, 404b–e, 407a–b and Pl. *Phdr.* 229c–e.

24 Pl. *Cra.* 407a–c; Pl. *Prt.* 316d; Plat. *Ion* 530b–d; Plat. *Lys.* 214b–d and Ps.-Plat. *Alk.* 2.147b.

25 Cic. *nat.* 1.41, 2.63–2.72; Struck 2004, 188.

26 Plut. *aud. poet.* 19e–20a; Plut. *Is.* 351, 352a, 361e,

362e, 363d.

27 Ar. *Ran.* (*batr.*) 1034; Xen. *Symp.* 3.5, 4.6–7; Strab. *geogr.* 1.2.3, 1.2.17; Polyb. 34.4.4; Paus. 8.8.3; Diog. Laert. 9.22; *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* Vol.3 fr.654, 655; Cornut. *Theol. Gr.* 35.75.18–35.76.5; Ps.-Plut. *Mor.* 879c–880d; Struck 2004, 118.

28 Tate 1934, 107.

29 Tate 1934, n. 13.

3 Cosmic allegory

Regardless of their specific philosophical inclinations, the most common feature among many interpreters of Homer was that they attributed to Homer the mastery of a number of academic disciplines that rely on astronomical knowledge.³⁰ The earliest record we have of cosmic allegory is also our first record of Homeric exegesis, where we are told Pherecydes interpreted the interaction between Zeus and Hera in *Iliad* 1.590 and 15.18 to be “the words of god to matter, which god put in order”; in short, a cosmogonical allegory.³¹ Similarly, both Theagenes and Metrodorus, another of our earliest allegorists, provide examples of cosmic allegory, referring to the gods and heroes as elemental forces.³² The Derveni Papyrus is perhaps the most extensive early example of purely cosmic allegory, although it pertains to Orphic mythology and so will not be discussed here.³³

This prevalent belief that literary interpretations of Homer are bound up with ontological ones naturally leads commentators to allegorical analysis of cosmic phenomena. So much so that marrying the philosophical doctrines of the construction (cosmogony) and nature (cosmology) of the universe with Homeric verse became the most common philosophic convention, practiced by Zeno, Diogenes, and Apollodorus, among others.³⁴ For instance: Porphyry discusses Homeric horology in his passage on ‘saffron-robed Dawn’; Plutarch despairs of divinatory interpretations pertaining to the planets; both Strabo and Hipparchus dub him the father of geography; and Heraclitus, like many other philosophers, read his cosmic theologies in Homer’s works.³⁵ For example, Theagenes’ states:

For indeed they say that the dry fights with the wet, the hot with the cold, and the light with the heavy; furthermore, that water extinguishes fire, but fire dries water. Similarly, the opposition accrues to all the elements out of which the universe consists ... He [Homer] arranges battles by naming fire Apollo ... the water Poseidon ... the moon Artemis, the air Hera.³⁶

30 Schenkeveld 1976, 52; Heraclitus of Ephesus (attr.) in Kahn 1981, 113.

31 Fragment DK 7 B5; Baxter 1992, 120; see also Anaximenes in Buffiere 1973, 115–117.

32 Fragment DK 8 A2; fragment DK 61 A4; Richardson 1975, 68–70; Struck 2004, 28.

33 Laks and Most 1997.

34 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 4; see also Zen. *Homeric Questions*; Republic: Chrysippus *On the Republic*; *On the Gods*; Philo *On Piety*; Diogenes of Babylon *On*

Athena; Apollodorus of Athens *On the Gods*; Russell and Konstan 2005, xiii.

35 Porphyry’s *Homeric Questions* 8.4–15 in MacPhail 2011, 129; Plutarch’s *On How to Study Poetry* in Goodwin 1878, 4; Strab. *Geogr.* 1.1.2 and for example Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 22 and 33; Pl. *Tht.* 152e; Arist. *Metaph.* 983b.

36 Porphyry’s *Homeric Questions* 20.67–75 in MacPhail 2011, 241.

In this brief extract Theagenes discusses what we would now call physics (the opposition of universal elements), cosmology (the composition of the universe), astronomy/astrology (by identifying planetary bodies such as the moon with divinities), and even meteorology (associating weather phenomena with deities). It should be emphasized, therefore, that the majority of critics and interpreters of antiquity should not be exclusively discussed in philological or literary contexts, but rather in theological and cosmogonical ones.³⁷ The next part of this paper will aim to demonstrate with examples the extent to which ancient allegoresis relied on cosmic allegory.

It is an important caveat, however, to first distinguish these interpreters of metaphor and allegory (both ancient and modern) from those who drew what can be called astronomical *data*, such as eclipses and asterisms, from Homer's epics.³⁸ This paper attempts to avoid discussing whether or not Homer's epics recorded specific astronomical events, such as eclipses, and instead focusses upon how various scholars of Homer, from past to present, have interpreted his works as containing a kind of 'philosophical cosmology'. To this end, the word 'cosmic' is used to refer largely to cosmogonical, but also 'astro-philosophical' narratives, or narratives concerning the relationship between man's soul and the universe; whereas the term 'astronomical' is used to identify observations of specific celestial phenomena. These astronomic observations are, of course, equally informative to the broader theme of 'Homer and Astronomy', but they do not concern the metaphorical scope of this volume, and as such will be dealt with at a later time.

4 Heraclitus

Heraclitus the 'Allegorist' was a grammarian flourishing in the first century CE and is perhaps the most famous interpreter of Homer from antiquity. Heraclitus' text, most commonly titled *Homeric Problems*, argued that it was the responsibility of philosophers and grammarians to intuit Homer's works, and glean from them philosophical and scientific truths.³⁹ While Heraclitus was neither the first, nor last, student of Homer to elucidate allegorically 'encoded' cosmic knowledge from Homer's works; *Homeric Problems* has been selected for exploration in this paper for several reasons. First of all, his is one of the largest extant and comprehensive treatises dedicated to Homeric allegory, and as such provides an effective example of what can be considered first-century allegori-

37 Long 1992, 51.

38 Modern examples include Schoch 1921, 19–21; Lorimer 1951, 86–101; Gendler 1984, 489–490; Lori 1989, 57; Mavrommatis 2000, 112–114; Flan-

ders 2007, 82; Baikouzis and Magnasco 2008, 8823–8828; Tomboulidis 2008, 130–133; Theodossiou et al. 2011, 22–30.

39 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 5, 75; Tate 1934, 106.

cal Homeric criticism.⁴⁰ Fundamentally, Heraclitus explicitly identifies what he does as allegorical exegesis, unlike earlier writers.⁴¹ He is also the first critic to make so much use of the term *allegoria* and its cognates, which appear on almost every page of the treatise.⁴² Heraclitus openly defines allegory as a literary trope, in much the same manner as Quintilian; they also both refer to the same example in order to demonstrate that allegory is a form of extended metaphor.⁴³ Heraclitus also belongs to the small group of allegorical commentators that assume authorial intent.⁴⁴ Finally, Heraclitus also dedicates the majority of his discourse to cosmological interpretation – which spans a range of cosmological themes, such as the origin of the universe and the interactions of its constituent elements – as well as referencing particular astronomical phenomena, and as such provides the best example for the present discussion.

Heraclitus devotes a number of passages to cosmological explanations. He argues that “Homer has given us indications of the basic elements of the natural world”, which in turn are the “origin[s] of all things.”⁴⁵ In short, he believed that Homer’s texts contained allegorical accounts of the birth of the universe (cosmogony) and the composition of its constituent parts, or elements (cosmology). In *Problems* 23, for example, Heraclitus interprets the oath from *Iliad* 3.276–280 with a cosmological eye:

Ζεῦ πάτερ Ἰδηθεν μεδέων κύδιστε μέγιστε,
 Ἥελιός θ', ὃς πάντ' ἐφορᾷς καὶ πάντ' ἐπακούεις,
 καὶ ποταμοὶ καὶ γαῖα, καὶ οἱ ὑπένερθε καμόντας
 ἄνθρωπους τίνυσθον ὅτις κ' ἐπίορκον ὁμόσση,
 ὑμεῖς μάρτυροι ἔστε, φυλάσσετε δ' ὄρκια πιστά:

Father Zeus, ruler of Ida, noblest and greatest,
 and Helios, observer of all things and listener of all things,
 and rivers and earth, and you below whose work is to chastise
 dead men, those who swear their oaths falsely:
 you are the witnesses, trusted to keep guard this oath.⁴⁶

Following the tradition before him, Heraclitus claims that the divinities listed in the oath represent the physical elements: æther/fire (Zeus), air (Hades), water (rivers), and

40 Cornutus has also provided us with a large allegorical treatise; however, he claims to summarize the works of others (Cornut. *Theol. Gr.* 35.76.6–35.76.9) and as such Heraclitus has been selected as the primary account. For a list of similarities see Struck 2004, 153–154 n. 28–41.

41 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 1.5.

42 Struck 2004, 152–153: The words *ainigma* and *sum-*

bolon are also used throughout as synonymous with allegory.

43 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 5; Quint. *inst.* 8.44.

44 Long 1992, 42; Struck 2004, 152. For more on issues of authorial intent and allegorical exegesis see Struck 2004, 28, 44, 149.

45 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 23.22.

46 Hom. *Il.* 3.276–3.280 (translation by the author).

earth, as well as adding the Peripatetic ‘force of rotation’ (Helios).⁴⁷ Similarly, in his discussion of the Binding of Hera (*Il.* 15.18–21) Heraclitus maintains that the story is merely an analogy of “a theological account of the creation of the universe”, referring again to the four constituent elements of cosmic creation: æther/fire, air, water, and earth.⁴⁸ He moves on from this passage to discuss another two oaths: Hera’s from *Il.* 15.36–15.38, and Poseidon’s from *Il.* 15.186–193. In these instances, however, Heraclitus couples “an allegory of the original four elements” with a cosmogonical account of the threefold division of the Homeric universe.⁴⁹

The tripartite division of the universe is a common cosmogonical trope found in a range of ancient literature.⁵⁰ But it was Poseidon’s speech of *Il.* 15 that was selected by Heraclitus for close examination:

τρεῖς γάρ τ’ ἐκ Κρόνου εἰμὲν ἀδελφείοι οὗς τέκετο Ῥέα
 Ζεὺς καὶ ἐγώ, τρίτατος δ’ Αἴδης ἐνέροισιν ἀνάσσων.
 τριχῶ δὲ πάντα δέδασται, ἕκαστος δ’ ἔμμορε τιμῆς·
 ἦτοι ἐγὼν ἔλαχον πολλὴν ἄλλα ναιέμεν αἰεὶ
 παλλομένων, Αἴδης δ’ ἔλαχε ζόφον ἡρόεντα,
 Ζεὺς δ’ ἔλαχ’ οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἐν αἰθέρι καὶ νεφέλῃσι·
 γαῖα δ’ ἔτι ξυνὴ πάντων καὶ μακρὸς Ὀλύμπος.

Three we are born of Kronos, sons of the same mother who bore us – Rhea
 Zeus, and myself, the third is Hades who is lord of those beneath the earth.
 All was divided into three, and each received his rightful portion:
 truly, I for myself obtained the lot of the grey salt-sea to dwell in forever
 when the lots were cast, Hades obtained the lot of murky darkness,
 Zeus obtained the lot of broad heaven amid the æther and clouds:
 Gaia remains common to all, as does high Olympus.⁵¹

Heraclitus explains that when Homer speaks of Kronos he actually refers to the concept of Time ‘the root of the four elements’, while his wife Rhea represents the perpetual flow of the universe (*rhysis*).⁵² Together therefore, Time and Flow are imagined as the parents of the remaining (four) elements. Zeus’ heaven again is the domain of fiery æther, water belongs to Poseidon, Hades receives ‘unilluminated air’, while earth (Gaia) sits at the very center ‘common to all.’⁵³ In this manner, Heraclitus believed, Homer

47 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 23; for further discussion of the elements see 7, 15, 24, 26, 36, 39. For further discussion of Heraclitus’ philosophical inclinations see Thompson 1973, 10–13, 155–162; Struck 2004, 142–143.

48 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 40.

49 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 41.

50 *Atrahasis* (SBV) 1.12–18, 2.16–19, 2.30–33, 10; Hes. *Theog.* 413, 427; Achilles’ shield *Il.* 18.493 and *Hymn to Demeter* 33.

51 Hom. *Il.* 15.186–193 (translation by the author).

52 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 41.

53 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 41; Hom. *Il.* 15.193.

expressed the origins of the elements (from Time and Flow, Kronos and Rhea) as well as their universal placements. He further argues that Homer repeatedly referred to ‘these [cosmic] matters’, usually through the medium of oaths.⁵⁴ That the fundamental aspects of the cosmos should be the generic content of oaths should not be surprising when such an oath effectively encompasses the whole universe – making it the most powerful and binding of vows, as Hera demonstrates:

ἴστω νῦν τόδε Γαῖα καὶ Οὐρανὸς εὐρὺς ὕπερθε
καὶ τὸ κατειβόμενον Στυγὸς ὕδωρ, ὅς τε μέγιστος
ῥκος δεινότητός τε πέλει μακάρεσσι θεοῖσι

Know this, Gaia and broad Ouranos above
and the Stygian water that flows below, this is
the greatest and most formidable oath of the blessed gods.⁵⁵

Heraclitus further argues that Homer expressed this cosmogonic trope most clearly in the account of Achilles’ shield from *Il.* 18.478–613:

In forging the Shield of Achilles as an image of the revolution of the cosmos, [Homer] has shown by clear evidences how the universe originated ... and how its different parts were formed.⁵⁶

It is clear, therefore, that Heraclitus believed the Homeric epics contained allegorical references to the cosmogonic origins, and construction of the elements of, the universe. The account of Achilles’ shield as a cosmogonical metaphor raises matters of celestial geometry. The roundness of Achilles’ shield, according to Heraclitus, intentionally evokes the roundness of the universe.⁵⁷ This analogy is reinforced by *Problems* 36, which discusses the spherical nature and rotation of the universe according to evidence found in *Il.* 8.16. Heraclitus here claims that “Homer gives the dimension of the sphere on geometrical principles”, which in turn inform his knowledge of the shape of the cosmos.⁵⁸ Homer calls the sun *elektor/heliktōr*, meaning ‘spiraler’, “because he measures off the world day and night by his circular movement”.⁵⁹ According to Heraclitus, Homer knew that the universe was spherical and that the paths of sun and moon demonstrated that fact, because the Shield of Achilles represented it.

Heraclitus also makes much of what he calls his ‘First Allegory’, namely, “that Apollo is identical with the Sun, and that one god is honoured under two names”, and devotes

54 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 41.

55 Hom. *Il.*: 15.36–38 (translation by the author).

56 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 43; Crates also interpreted the Shield as *kosmopoīia* (Eustathius fr. 1167).

57 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 43, also, 47–48.

58 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 36.

59 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 44.

much time to this association – even connecting Apollo’s arrows metaphorically with the shafts of the sun.⁶⁰ Heraclitus’ analysis of Apollo as the sun also contains a discussion of the seasons – particularly using lines from the *Iliad* to demonstrate that the “season when the Greeks fell sick was the summer.”⁶¹ However, this is not so much an allegorical interpretation as a poetic one. It is relatively easy to glean from lines such as “Then did ox-eyed Queen Hera send untiring Helios unwillingly into the river of Okeanos” that the poet is referring to long summer days without enumerating all the examples of soldiers sweating in the heat as Heraclitus does in *Problems* 10.⁶² However, its inclusion within the list of Heraclitus’ allegories provides further evidence of his preoccupation with the breadth of Homer’s cosmic wisdom.

Heraclitus continues his horological readings of Homer in *Problems* 39, where he discusses the joining of Zeus and Hera on Mount Ida from *Il.* 14.347–353. This episode was often cited as clear evidence of Homer’s desire to lead young men into immorality, but Heraclitus calls it simply “an allegorical way of speaking of the spring.”⁶³ For Heraclitus, the floral imagery and growth of new grass (*Il.* 14.347) combined with the dewy weather (*Il.* 14.351) both serve to mark this sexual encounter as a metaphor for the birth of spring.⁶⁴

References to actual astronomical features, such as the constellations, are limited to the description of Achilles’ Shield in *Problems*.⁶⁵ Yet, the rest of the text seems almost entirely devoted to uncovering evidence of Homer’s cosmic knowledge, or what Heraclitus calls Homer’s “scientific theology in allegorical form.”⁶⁶ Furthermore, while the majority of this study has considered the *Iliad*, Heraclitus also devoted some 20 paragraphs to the *Odyssey*. Here, a few cosmic allegories are uncovered, such as the account of Proteus, whose shape-shifting is likened both to the elements and the primordial origin of the universe.⁶⁷ Similarly, Aeolus’ twelve children are connected to the twelve months of the yearly cycle, while Aeolus himself is described as a master of time, represented by his control over the seasonal winds.⁶⁸ Furthermore, Heraclitus names Odysseus as “the first man to foretell good sailing weather by his knowledge of astronomy,” implying that Homer also possessed the same navigational knowledge.⁶⁹ Finally Heraclitus, like many astronomers after him, also associates Theoclymenus’ prophecy from *Odyssey* 14 with a solar eclipse.⁷⁰ However, the remainder of the *Odyssey* section is largely devoted

60 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 6.13, see also 7–17, 52; Cornut. *Theol. Gr.* 32; Ps.-Plut. *Life of Homer* 202.

61 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 8.

62 Hom. *Il.* 18.239–239.40 (translation by the author); Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 8–11.

63 Pl. *Resp.* 390c; Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 39.

64 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 39.

65 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 49–50.

66 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 58.

67 Hom. *Od.* 4.456–458; Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 66, 65. For more on shape-shifting see section 2.

68 Hom. *Od.* 10.6–22; Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 71.

69 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 70.

70 Hom. *Od.* 14.62; Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 74–75; see also n. 6 (above).

to a consideration of Odysseus as a symbol of various philosophical virtues.⁷¹ In summary, Heraclitus interprets both Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as receptacles of allegorical truths pertaining mostly to cosmic and astronomical matters. Yet he adds to the *Odyssey* a deeper moral truth; an interpretation that was continued in Porphyry's allegorical reading of Homer.

Towards the end of his discussion of Homer's *Odyssey*, Heraclitus presents a series of questions to Plato, in an attempt to rebut his accusations of impiety in the standard practice of the Homeric Apology. He writes scathingly of how Plato's works reflect his own sexual proclivities: "It is only natural therefore that ... Plato's conversation [should be] the loves of young men", while Homer's works piously record "the life of heroes".⁷² Furthermore, he implies that a work containing references to "Heaven and the universe ... earth and sea ... sun and moon and the motions of the fixed stars and planets" – such as Homer's – is a true philosophical work, suggesting that he believed Homer to be a greater philosopher than Plato (though he seems to ignore the cosmic account from the myth of Er for the purposes of this argument).⁷³ However, the link between the cosmos and divinities is not the only reason why a writer of cosmological allegory should be considered pious; Heraclitus suggests that the *Odyssey* is a tale of virtue – which provides the intuitive reader with a formula for celestial salvation through the veil of allegory:

After all this, can Homer, the great hierophant of heaven and of the gods,
who opened up for human souls the untrodden and closed paths to heaven
deserve to be condemned as impious?⁷⁴

5 Porphyry of Tyre

For both Heraclitus and Porphyry, those who see in Homer mere fabrication, rather than intentional allegory, miss the point of the poets.⁷⁵ They also share a similar soteriological concern for the relationship between the heavens and the soul.⁷⁶ In the third century CE, Porphyry made similar connections between celestial salvation and the narrative of Homer's *Odyssey* as Heraclitus did, though his extant allegorical interpretation centers on a particular passage from *Odyssey* 13, rather than the breadth of the Homeric corpus.⁷⁷

71 A common conceit, see Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 78; Aristoph. *Ran.* (*batr.*) 1034; Xen. *mem.* (*apomn.*) 1.3.7; Basil of Caesarea *Oratio ad adolescents* 5; a comprehensive overview can be found in Montiglio 2005, 43, 147, 172, 178–179, 188, 194, 196, 205–206, 209.

72 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 78.

73 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 77; Pl. *Resp.* 10.

74 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems* 76; see for example Dowden and Livingstone 2011, 283–300; Adluri 2013, 343–356.

75 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 4 (trans. Taylor 1917).

76 Lamberton and Keaney 1992, xx.

77 Hom. *Od.* 13.93–112. Porph. *antr.* (*nymph. antr.*).

Porphyry is thought to be the author of a text also called *Homeric Questions*, though this concerned only the *Iliad* and does not contain as much theological-cosmological allegory as Heraclitus.⁷⁸ The narrative passage of Homer's *Odyssey*, which primarily concerned Porphyry, pertains to a description of the Ithacan coastline, known as the *Cave of the Nymphs* (*De antro nymphaeum*), portrayed when Odysseus finally returns home. The cave is described thus:

αὐτὰρ ἐπὶ κρατὸς λιμένος τανύφυλλος ἐλαίη,
 ἀγχόθι δ' αὐτῆς ἄντρον ἐπήρατον ἡροειδές,
 ἱρὸν νυμφάων αἰ νηϊάδες καλέονται.
 ἐν δὲ κρητῆρές τε καὶ ἀμφοροῖες ἕασιν
 λάϊνοι: ἔνθα δ' ἔπειτα τιθαιβώσσουσι μέλισσαι.
 ἐν δ' ἴστοι λίθιοι περιμήκεες, ἔνθα τε νύμφαι
 φάρε' ὑφαίνουσιν ἀλιπόρφυρα, θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι:
 ἐν δ' ὕδατ' ἀενάοντα. δῶ δέ τέ οἱ θύραι εἰσίν,
 αἰ μὲν πρὸς Βορέαο καταββαταὶ ἀνθρώποισιν,
 αἰ δ' αὖ πρὸς Νότου εἰσὶ θεώτεραι: οὐδέ τι κείνη
 ἄνδρες ἐσέρχονται, ἀλλ' ἀθανάτων ὁδὸς ἐστίν.

But upon the head of the harbor there is an olive tree with long-pointed leaves;
 Nearby, is a cave that is lovely and misty-dark;
 it is sacred to those sea-Nymphs, called the Naiads.
 Within are mixing bowls and amphorae
 made of stone; where the bees store their honey.
 Inside, set upright are very tall stone looms, there the nymphs
 weave their cloths of sea-purple – a wonder to see.
 In there, water is ever-flowing. Two entrances it has
 the one facing the direction of Boreas [North Wind], where men descend
 the other one facing the direction of Notos [South Wind], which is more divine:
 that way men cannot enter, only immortals take that road.⁷⁹

Porphyry, like Heraclitus, is explicit that he continues a tradition of allegorical interpretation.

the poet [Homer], under the veil of allegory, conceals some mysterious signification;
 thus compelling others to explore what the gate of men is and also what is the

78 Porphyry's *Homeric Questions* in MacPhail 2011.

79 Hom. Od. 13.102–112 (translation by the author).

gate of the Gods:

[and] what he means by asserting that this cave of the Nymphs has two gates.⁸⁰

This demonstrates a continuation of both the tradition of Homeric allegorical interpretation, and the newer application of Neoplatonic philosophical tenets to Homer's corpora.⁸¹ However, unlike Heraclitus' more general overview, Porphyry's allegorical interpretation of *Odyssey* 13 sets out a specific cosmological argument, providing an excellent counterpoint for study. First he argues that the Ithacan cave represents a cosmic gateway through which man journeys to godliness through ascending or to birth by descending.⁸² Second, Odysseus' encounter with Athena outside the cave represents his completed spiritual transformation (or ascension) from man to god – through the power of his reason and wisdom.⁸³ Though Porphyry's purpose for demonstrating such a 'truth' is outside the remit of this paper, it was arguably to encourage (Neoplatonic) philosophers to expand their rational discourse towards a contemplation of higher matters.⁸⁴

Porphyry first outlines the theological and philosophical significance of caves – particularly in their relation to the universe and the journey of the soul into generation. He states that "caves in the most remote periods of antiquity were consecrated to the Gods" and that "theologists consider caverns as symbols of the world."⁸⁵ His definition of 'theologists' here seems to extend both to philosophers, such as Plato ("Plato showed that the world is a cavern"), as well as religious practitioners, such as the Mithraists ("wherever Mithra was known, they propitiated the God in a cavern").⁸⁶ Porphyry therefore asserts that Homer's passage is an allegorical rendition of the connection between the cave as a symbol of the universe, and the transmigration of the soul, as discussed by philosophers and practiced by Mithraists. The former assertion is outlined through his celestial explanation of Homer's Ithacan cave.⁸⁷ In particular, the end of the *Odyssey* passage:

Two entrances⁸⁸ it [the Cave of the Nymphs] has,
the one facing the direction of Boreas [North Wind], where men descend [un-

80 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 1.

81 Lamberton and Keaney 1992, 117, 126; Struck 2004, 142; Vernant 1980, 212.

82 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 10–14.

83 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 15.

84 Hoffman 2014, Abstract.

85 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 9; 4.

86 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 3; 9, see also Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 2: "Thus also the Persians, mystically signifying the descent of the soul into the sublunary

regions, and its regression from it, initiate the mystic in a place which they denominate a cavern". See Pl. *Resp.* 514a–520a; perhaps also Paus. 1.17.5; Dio Cass. 4.50; Strab. *Geogr.* 5.4.5; for more on caves and their significance Claus 1990, 42; Hardie 1977, 279; Ogden 2001, 43; Ustinova 2009.

87 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 9.

88 The term 'thurai' was used by later philosophers to refer metaphorically to the entrances to the soul (e.g. Aristain. 2.7); Liddell and Scott 1940, s.v. θύρα.

derground?]⁸⁹

the other one facing the direction of Notos [South Wind], which is more divine: that way
cannot be entered by men, only immortals take that road.⁹⁰

Porphyry draws a direct parallel between the Northern and Southern gates of the Ithacan cave with the Northern and Southern celestial tropics: Cancer and Capricorn respectively.⁹¹ He writes that “Cancer is the gate through which souls descend; but Capricorn that through which they ascend” because “Cancer is indeed northern, and adapted to descent; but Capricorn is southern, and adapted to ascent”.⁹² That is to say that the (celestial) Tropic of Cancer lies halfway between the celestial equator (a projection of our equator upon the sky), and the most northern star; whereas the (celestial) Tropic of Capricorn lies halfway between the celestial equator, and the most southern star. Therefore, to reach the central regions of both sky and earth (where the Greeks positioned themselves) one must travel south, or ‘descend’ from the Tropic of Cancer, and north, or ‘ascend’ from the Tropic of Capricorn. Furthermore, he makes connections between, on the one hand, the Tropic of Cancer or the Northern gate for human souls, and on the other; the Tropic of Capricorn or Southern gate for immortals:

The northern parts, likewise, pertain to souls descending into generation.

And the gates of the cavern which are turned to the north are rightly said to be pervious to the descent of men; but the southern gates are not the avenues of the Gods, but of souls ascending to the Gods.

Porphyry here notes an important caveat – that the Southern gate is not exclusive to the gods, but to immortals. Meaning that it is possible for a man’s immortal soul to cross this gateway.⁹³ On this account, the poet does not say that they are the avenues of the Gods, but of immortals; this appellation being also common to our souls, which are *per se*, or essentially, immortal.⁹⁴

Porphyry therefore draws clear connections between the transmigration of the soul and Homer’s sacred cave throughout *On the Cave of the Nymphs*. He further reinforces this connection in three stages. First, he emphasizes the significance of water as a spiritual conduit – “for water co-operates in the work of generation” (*On the Cave of the Nymphs* 7) – when referring to the “ever-flowing [or ever-lasting] water” of *Odyssey* 13.109. This

89 The term *kataibatai* was used by Aristophanes to describe Hermes leading souls down to the underworld in his role as psychopomp in *Peace* 649; Liddell and Scott 1940, s.v. καταβαται.

90 Hom. *Od.* 13.109–109.12 (translation by the author).

91 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 10.

92 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 11.

93 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 11.

94 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 11.

belief is no doubt connected to Thales' precept that water is a progenitor.⁹⁵ Second, Porphyry draws a connection between the life-giving quality of water and the nymphs as symbols or manifestations of souls. He writes that "souls are *profoundly* steeped in moisture" and "therefore, souls proceeding into generation are the nymphs called naiades" because of their association with water.⁹⁶ Here, Porphyry also explains why Homer describes the amphorae within the cave as being filled by the honey of bees (*Od.* 13.106), rather than wine, water, or perfume, because Nymphs were "peculiarly called bees" by the "ancients."⁹⁷ Ergo the specific assemblage of water, Naiads (who are also called sea-Nymphs in *Od.* 13.104), and bees, together symbolize "souls descending into generation."⁹⁸ Porphyry asserts, therefore, that Homer's Ithacan cave is a cosmic conduit through which immortal souls descend into birth.⁹⁹ Porphyry's interpretation represents a movement away from Heraclitus' more general defense of Homer as a learned and pious man who expressed truths about the origin and structure of the universe in metaphor, towards a deeper interpretation of Homer's *Odyssey* as an allegory of spiritual salvation.

This is perhaps best expressed in his analysis of Athena. That Athena is presented as an embodiment of wisdom serves only to draw this transmigration in-line with the Neoplatonic goal of philosophical reason.¹⁰⁰ Porphyry calls the olive-tree that spreads its branches above the cave the "true enigma." He explains that the olive sits at the head of the cavern, as Athena sprung from the head of Zeus, and that it symbolizes the intelligent design behind the construction of the universe (symbolized by the cave). Therefore, Odysseus returns home, and

Here, naked, and assuming a suppliant habit, afflicted in body, casting aside everything superfluous, and being averse to the energies of sense, [he] sit[s] at the foot of the olive and consult[s] with Minerva by what means [h]e may most effectually destroy [the dark] passions which reside in the soul.¹⁰¹

In short, Athena is the embodiment of wisdom, which Odysseus – as representative of the philosopher – must humbly solicit in order to reach godliness through the cosmic portal symbolized by the Ithacan cave.

This association between astronomical gates and the path of the soul is a very common trope found throughout antiquity, especially among those philosophers and religions concerned with spiritual salvation.¹⁰² It is clear through his focus on Athena as a

95 Arist. *Metaph.* 283b.

96 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 4; 5 (original italics).

97 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 7.

98 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 4.

99 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 14.

100 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 15–17.

101 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 16.

102 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 11: "Parmenides mentions these two gates in his treatise *On the Nature of Things*, as likewise that they are not unknown to the Romans and Egyptians."

font of wisdom and reflection of the Demiurge, however, that Porphyry interprets the Homeric text with a Neoplatonic bias.¹⁰³ He builds on the assertions of Heraclitus – that Homer’s text contained not only cosmological but also moral wisdom – and adds that Homer encoded within his account of the Ithacan cave, and Odysseus’ return home, an allegorical recipe for eternal salvation. This development perhaps clarifies Heraclitus’ closing assertion that Homer “opened up for human souls the untrodden and closed paths to heaven.”¹⁰⁴

Both examples have demonstrated the assertion that some of the best examples of literary criticism from antiquity should be better called cosmological allegoresis. Understanding the passages in this way serves two purposes. First, it places our understanding of ancient literary criticism better in line with their perception of the ancients who were considered “not nobodies but competent students of the world, and well equipped to philosophise about it via symbols and riddles.”¹⁰⁵ Cornutus’ view demonstrates the popular belief that “the poem is primarily a vehicle for profound truths about the cosmos and our place within in.”¹⁰⁶ This is a factor that can be overlooked if we attempt to restrict our understanding of ancient literary criticism to simple philological or literary contexts in order to reflect our own biases.¹⁰⁷ The concept of “the poet as a solitary genius attuned to the hidden truths of the cosmic order” is demonstrably present in the ancient critics, but it also has its echoes in contemporary scholarship.¹⁰⁸ For example, Bremer interprets Homer’s description of Hephaestus defeating Scamander as a contest between the elemental forces of fire and water, representing an inversion of the cosmic order.¹⁰⁹ This interpretation is not so different to those posed by the likes of Heraclitus when describing Homeric accounts of the universe.

6 Gregory Nagy

The tradition of cosmic allegorical interpretations of Homer established by Greek thinkers has continued into modern Classical studies. The remainder of this paper, therefore, concentrates on the comprehensive interpretation of Homeric metaphorical symbolism as found in several works by the Harvard Classics Professor Gregory Nagy.¹¹⁰ Nagy has been selected for study as he subtly imitates scholars of the exegetic tradition. First, he has himself produced a work entitled *Homeric Questions*, in line with many classical

103 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 15.

104 Homeric Problems: 76.

105 Cornut. *Epidrome* 76.

106 Struck 2004, 151.

107 Ford 2002, 70.

108 Struck 2004, 13.

109 Bremer 1987, 39.

110 Namely Nagy 1990a; Nagy 2013. See also, for example, Marinatos 2001, 381–416.

allegorists, which he himself cites.¹¹¹ He also provides an interpretation of Odysseus' journey that relies on cosmic allegory and analogy, utilizing the language of ancient interpreters such as *ainos*, *sēma*, and *sumbolon*.¹¹² Furthermore, like Porphyry before him, Nagy argues that Odysseus' return home is reflective of a mystical journey "embedded in the plot of the *Odyssey*" "as a metaphor".¹¹³ However, instead of analyzing a singular passage as Porphyry had, Nagy combines broader philological premises found throughout the text with narrative analysis. He demonstrates that the *Odyssey* comprises a unified account that combines the motions of the sun with a journey of spiritual awakening.

An important caveat: Nagy's interpretation relies heavily on constructions of Indo-European roots drawn from conclusions made by linguist Douglas Frame.¹¹⁴ However, it is important to make clear that this paper is not concerned with proving or disproving the validity of Frame's, or Nagy's, linguistic claims inasmuch as it is concerned with the fact that his, and Nagy's, works reflect a continuation of the tradition of cosmological interpretations of Homeric texts.¹¹⁵

Nagy argues, in brief, that the *Odyssey* is a text "built on the symbolism of rebirth from death, as verbalised in the *noos/nostos* of Odysseus himself"; and importantly for this study, "visualised in the dynamics of sunrise after sunset".¹¹⁶ There are several facets to this argument. First is that the themes of *noos* ('consciousness') and *nostos* [or *neomai*] ('return') are both pivotal to the *Odyssey*'s narrative. Second, that *noos* and *nostos* are linguistically connected by the same Indo-European root. This suggests that the two are also metaphorically connected inasmuch as the *nostos*, 'return', is both physical and 'psyche-cal'. The connection between 'return' and 'consciousness' further draws upon associations with both: light, reflected in analogies of sunrise and sunset; and life, reflected in analogies of spiritual awakening. Therefore, Nagy believes, the *Odyssey* is a text that ultimately combines three layers of meaning or metaphor: (1) the physical return home and (2) the awakening from sleep/death, which is set within (3) the cosmic framework of sunrise and sunset.

Nagy's argument builds upon D. Frame's theory that the terms *noos* and *nostos* both stem from the same Indo-European root **nes-*.¹¹⁷ *Noos* is constructed as **nos-os*, derived from **nes-*, while *nostos* is a nominal derivative of *neomai* – itself stemming from the same lexical root.¹¹⁸ Frame asserts that once the "semantic difficulty" between these two terms is removed, it can be demonstrated that 'mind' and 'return home' were "once

111 Nagy 1996, 1; his claim places him in the company of Heraclitus, Porphyry, Aristotle, and Zeno (c.f. Diog. Laert. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 7.1.4).

112 Porphyry *Homeric Questions* 23.2, 24.5, 46.6, 52.19; Struck 2004, 23, 73; Ford 2002, 74; Nagy 1990a, 202–222; Nagy 1990b, 148, 192–94, 196–200.

113 Nagy 2013, 275.

114 Frame 1978.

115 Macksey 1979, 1270; Combella 1981, 225–228.

116 Nagy 1990a, 93.

117 Frame 1978, ix.

118 Frame 1978, ix–x.

closely related in the Greek language”.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, it is precisely this close relation that affiliates the terms with a fundamental myth of humankind: the return to life that is itself “universally associated with the mythology of the returning sun”.¹²⁰ This association with the sun is drawn from the meaning of the Greek root *nes-*, which Frame documents as “a return from death” and therefore implicitly also “a return from darkness”, given that – in Greek myth – the underworld is a place where the sun does not shine.¹²¹ It is therefore through this connection with the role of the sun that Frame gives the Indo-European root **nes-* a meaning of “a return to light and life”; that is, “from darkness and death”.¹²² Nagy argues in support of this interpretation that “the very idea of consciousness as conveyed by *noos* is derived from the metaphor of returning [*nostos*] to light from darkness, as encapsulated in the moment of waking up from sleep”.¹²³

This theory of a linguistic connection between *noos* and *nostos* relies upon the argument that the terms are also thematically connected throughout Homer’s *Odyssey*. Indeed, both Frame and Nagy would argue that the terms are not merely thematically connected, but that the theme of ‘returning to light and life’ is itself the very core – or rather the very plot – of Homer’s narrative. Frame, for example, asserts that “the words *noos* and *neomai* come readily to mind in connection with Odysseus”, and argues that their presence in the proem of the *Odyssey* highlights their significance:

ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα πολλὰ
πλάγχθη, ἐπεὶ Τροίης ἱερὸν πτολίεθρον ἔπερσεν
πολλῶν δ’ ἀνθρώπων ἴδεν ἄστεα καὶ νόον ἔγνω,
πολλὰ δ’ ὃ γ’ ἐν πόντῳ πάθεν ἄλγεα ὃν κατὰ θυμόν,
ἀρνύμενος ἥν τε ψυχὴν καὶ νόστον ἐταίρων.¹²⁴

Though, of course, the relative placement of the terms does not of itself infer a thematic connection. Therefore, Frame demonstrates that, within the first hundred lines of the *Odyssey*, Homer tells us repeatedly that the story is an account of the homecoming (*nostos*)¹²⁵ of a man who is characterized by his *noos*.¹²⁶ In short, he argues that the *Odyssey* is thematically founded upon these two terms.

However, the real evidence for the fundamental thematic nature of these terms is elucidated throughout *The Myth of Return*. Here, Frame outlines the importance and prevalence of the terms through an assessment of their lexicographical connection and association with each other, drawing upon various examples from both the *Odyssey*, and

119 Frame 1978, x, 4.

120 Macksey 1979, 1270.

121 Frame 1978, 19–21.

122 Frame 1978, 28–33; Nagy 2013, 297.

123 Nagy 2013, 299. The metaphor of sleep to which Nagy here refers is undoubtedly Homer’s pairing

of Sleep (*Hypnos*) and Death (*Thanatos*) as brothers (Hom. *Il.*: 16.681, also; Hes. *Theog.* 775).

124 Hom. *Od.* 1.1–5; Frame 1978, ix. My emphasis.

125 Hom. *Od.* 1.5, 1.77.

126 Hom. *Od.* 1.3; 1.66; Frame 1978, x.

antithetically, the *Iliad*. Space does not allow for a full appraisal of Frame's examples; suffice to say that extensive connections are made with other Greek sources including Parmenides, Plato, and Pindar;¹²⁷ as well as non-Greek evidence, largely Vedic Sanskrit, but also Germanic and Albanian sources.¹²⁸ It is not the intention of this paper to outline Frames' argument further than to present his linguistic connection between *noos* and *nostos*, and subsequently his translation of the root **nes-* as a "return to light and life", which serves as the background for Nagy's metaphorical reading of Homer's *Odyssey*.

From these premises, Nagy connects the narrative of Odysseus' return home (*nostos*) with both the cosmic mechanics of the rising and setting sun, as well as the mystical enlightenment (*noos*) of the soul.¹²⁹ Like the "esoteric Neoplatonists" Nagy interprets the narrative of the *Odyssey* as fundamentally a spiritual one.¹³⁰ He writes that "this return of the hero from the realm of darkness and death into the realm of light and life is a journey of the soul".¹³¹ Also like Porphyry, Nagy utilizes a passage from *Odyssey* 13 to demonstrate his contention that the *Odyssey* is a composition of three simultaneous narratives: "built on the symbolism of rebirth from death, [...] verbalised in the *noos/nostos* of Odysseus himself, and visualised in the dynamics of sunrise after sunset".¹³² However, unlike Porphyry, Nagy relies on philological (rather than philosophical) methods in order to demonstrate the integral nature of these layers of metaphor within the narrative. Yet, he still does so within a cosmological framework.

The passage in question immediately precedes the description of the Ithacan Cave so loved by Porphyry. It reads:

When they leaned back, tossing the salt-sea with the blades of their oars
 then a delightful sleep fell upon his eyelids,
 an un-waking, pleasant sleep, nearest to death.
 As on a plain four stallions yoked together
 all at once spring forward beneath the blows of the lash
 and rising aloft they stir up to pass over their path;
 so too did the poop raise and swell, while behind her
 surged the great, seething, load-roaring sea.
 The unfailing ship ran without rest: not even the circling
 hawk could accompany her, lightest of all flying things.
 So swiftly she ran over the sea, cutting through the swell,
 carrying the man, resembling a God, with his cunning,
 one who had suffered very many pains, deep down in his spirit;

127 Frame 1978, 153–160.

128 Frame 1978, 125–162.

129 Nagy 1990a, 258–9; Nagy 2013, 298, 275.

130 Lamberton and Keaney 1992, 124.

131 Nagy 2013, 307.

132 Nagy 1990a, 93.

through wars of men, cleaving through waves of adversity.
 He now slept without trembling, [no longer seized by] his great suffering.
 When the brightest star rose above the horizon, with the great
 messenger of the light, early-born Dawn,
 then did the seafaring ship approach the island.¹³³

Nagy uses this passage to demonstrate the three layers of metaphor – associated with the ‘return to light and life’ – that run throughout the plot of the *Odyssey*.¹³⁴ He writes that the two meanings of *nostos* and *noos* “converge at [this] single point in the master myth of the *Odyssey*.”¹³⁵ Here, Odysseus’ sleep is likened to death (*Od.* 13.79–80), and therefore his subsequent waking (*Od.* 13.188) can be likened to a return to life. Nagy writes that Odysseus’ sleep “makes him momentarily unconscious” where he “forgets”¹³⁶ all the “algea” he has suffered, and that his return to the shore of Ithaca coincides with the rising of the morning star (*Od.* 13.102).¹³⁷ Odysseus’ homecoming is therefore synchronized with both “the moment of sunrise”, and “the moment of awakening from a sleep that most resembles death.”¹³⁸ In short, Odysseus’ physical return home is reconciled with both a psychical awakening, and the symbolism of enlightenment and rebirth reflected in the rising sun. Nagy applies Frame’s linguistic analysis to this passage by combining the metaphor of returning and awakening, with the cosmic mechanisms of sunrise.¹³⁹ This is a cosmic trope, as blatant as Porphyry’s cave entrances or Heraclitus’ description of Achilles’ shield, dressed in modern academic parlance. To this end, Nagy’s cosmic interpretation is less explicit than the works of Heraclitus, or indeed Porphyry, but that is not to say that the cosmic element of this tripartite metaphor is not important. Indeed, it is the association between the passage of the rising sun that thematically connects the otherwise disparate ‘return’ and ‘consciousness’. In short, there can be no spiritual return (or psychic awakening) without the metaphor of returning to light.

Nagy develops this connection between leaving darkness and returning to life through an exegesis on the importance of caves in the *Odyssey* narrative.¹⁴⁰ Frame also draws attention to the metaphorical significance of caves during his discussion of Nestor as a character famed for his *noos*.¹⁴¹ Whilst Frame’s critic F. Combellack writes condescendingly that “gates have long had for some theorists almost as great a fascination as caves”, their relevance to this study is already established through their treatment in Porphyry’s

133 Hom. *Od.* 13.78–95 (translation by the author).

134 Nagy 2013, 300–301; for Porphyry’s use of *metaphora* see Struck 2004, 73.

135 Nagy 2013, 299.

136 The verb is *λελασμένος*, which Nagy here connects to *ληθ* ‘forget’.

137 Nagy 2013, 300.

138 Nagy 2013, 300.

139 Nagy 1990a, 219.

140 Nagy 2013, 306–308.

141 Frame 1978, 90–93.

treitise.¹⁴² Rather, it is not modern academics who are preoccupied with caves, but ancient Greek theorists and religious practitioners, and so to dismiss them in modern literary studies would be a disservice. Nagy argues that “the grand theme of returning to light and life takes shape at the beginning of *Odyssey* 11 when Odysseus starts to make his descent to Hades.”¹⁴³ The *katabasis* narrative is described by Nagy as a psychic experience, that is to say a spiritual or metaphysical one, which is reflected in the descent to darkness and return to light experienced by Odysseus.¹⁴⁴ He draws the same metaphor from Odysseus’ experiences in Calypso’s cave, as well as that of the Cyclops.¹⁴⁵

For Nagy, the physical experience of returning to light after being within the darkness of a cave (or the underworld) is associated metaphorically with both the metaphysical experience of returning to life from death, and the cognitive experience of achieving enlightenment after ignorance. The same metaphorical association was made, rather more famously, by Plato.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, like the philosopher of Plato’s cave, Nagy believes that the linguistic connection between *noos* and *nostos* allows for an interpretation of Odysseus’ journey as a path of enlightenment, because in the proem “we can see that Odysseus is [...] struggling to save his soul *psukhē*. That struggle is the journey of his soul, undertaken by the *noos* ‘mind’ of Odysseus.”¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, the connection between caves and the cosmos (specifically regarding the role of the sun) is long-standing and found in a variety of mythological literature, as already demonstrated in the analysis of Porphyry’s *Cave of the Nymphs*. Therefore, it is not inconceivable that Nagy should read significance into them in the works of Homer.

The cosmic element to the triple metaphor of the *Odyssey* is expanded in the connection Nagy draws between Odysseus and the god Hermes in his role as psychopomp – an association never clearly examined in antiquity. In his discussion of Odysseus’ epithets, Nagy writes that:

The adjective πολυτροπος “of many turns” [...] ¹⁴⁸ serves as an epithet of Hermes, god of mediation between all the opposites of the universe. As a mediator between light and dark, life and death, wakefulness and sleep, heaven and earth, and so on, Hermes is πολυτροπος “of many turns.” ¹⁴⁹

According to Nagy, the epithet *polutropon* was originally attributed to Hermes, and applied to Odysseus in order to deliberately evoke these cosmic and spiritual associations of the god as a conduit between this world and the next; light and life to darkness and

142 Combellack 1981, 226; see n. 86.

143 Nagy 2013, 306.

144 Nagy 1990a, 218; Nagy 2013, 307.

145 Nagy 2013, 306.

146 Pl. *Resp.* 514a–520a.

147 Nagy 2013, 313

148 This is a literal translation of *polutropos* based on the roots *polus* ‘many’ and *tropos* ‘turning’. It is also translated as such by Barnouw 2004, 27.

149 Nagy 1990a, 34; for Hermes’ epithet see Hom. Hymn 4 (*to Hermes*) 13, 439.

death. Furthermore, both the epithet's prominence in line 1 of the proem and its identifying characteristic – recognized by Circe because of her knowledge from Hermes – are used to reinforce this interpretation.¹⁵⁰ Nagy connects the role of Hermes as psychopomp to the sun in another Homeric extract.

The extract in question is the Second Nekyia episode from the opening of *Odyssey* 24 where Hermes leads the ghosts of the suitors Odysseus has killed to the underworld.¹⁵¹ Here, Nagy draws attention to the sun's relationship to the descent (and ascent) of souls through the presence of the Gates of Helios described by Homer in this passage.¹⁵² He argues that the Gates of Helios in *Odyssey* 24 are the same Gates to Hades passed through in the *katabasis* scene (*Od.* 5.646f.) – implying that “the *psukhai* ‘spirits of the dead’ traverse to the underworld through the same passage travelled by the sun when it sets.”¹⁵³ Furthermore, Hermes, in his role as psychopomp, is directly connected to these same gates inasmuch as his epithet *pulēdokos* suggests that one of his fundamental roles is to meet souls at these cosmic portals.¹⁵⁴ Another of Hermes' attributes highlighted in this extract is as the wielder of the caduceus, which has the power to render men unconscious (i.e. remove their *noos*).¹⁵⁵ This aspect of his character supports Nagy's interpretation of Hermes as a divine manifestation of the ‘return to light and life’ theme.

The prominence of Hermes' caduceus in relation to the overarching theme of Nagy's interpretation was also noted by Frame when he discussed the role of Hermes.¹⁵⁶ However, in his example Frame draws on the ransom of Hector made by Priam from *Iliad* 24.¹⁵⁷ Priam's journey to visit Achilles in order to retrieve the body of his son is made within a similar cosmic framework to that found by Nagy within the *Odyssey*. Priam meets Hermes at the Tomb of Ilus at sunset and returns with Hermes as the sun rises.¹⁵⁸ It is only then that Hermes leaves.¹⁵⁹ Frame describes Priam's pseudo-*katabasis* as “a journey into ‘darkness and death’ and a ‘return to light and life’” where the exchange between Achilles and Priam, in imitation of the *Odyssey* narrative, “makes a traditional connection between the words *noos* and *neomai*.”¹⁶⁰

Nagy also connects the solar cycle and the underworld through his discussion of Okeanos. Just as in Porphyry's interpretation of the cave, Penelope's death wish in *Odyssey* 20 also seems to suggest that water is a conduit to the underworld:

Artemis, queenly goddess, daughter of Zeus, would you now
fire an arrow into my breast, and pull the spirit from me

150 Hom. *Od.* 1.1, 10.330–331; Nagy 1990a, 34.

151 Hom. *Od.* 24.1–15.

152 Nagy 1990a, 225. See also Frame 1978, 81–115.

153 Nagy 1990a, 226.

154 Homeric Hymn 4 (to Hermes) 15; Nagy 1990a, 226.

155 Hom. *Od.* 24.3.

156 Frame 1978, 153.

157 Frame 1978, 153. See also Juaregui 2011, 37–68.

158 Hom. *Il.* 24.350; 24.694.

159 Hom. *Il.* 24.694.

160 Frame 1978, 156.

this moment; or might a hurricane come
and bring me down to the misty-dark path
casting me into the outpouring, refilling Ocean.¹⁶¹

In this instance, however, the water is directly designated as Oceanus – the stream that perpetually flows, rather than symbolized by the Naiads.¹⁶² Interestingly, the adjective used here to describe the path of Oceanus, ῥερόεντα, is the same used in *Odyssey* 13 to describe the Ithacan Cave.¹⁶³ However, Nagy does not make reference to this. He instead sums up Penelope's understanding of the process of death as follows: "when you die, a gust of wind carries your spirit to the extreme west where it drops you into the Okeanos; when you traverse the Okeanos you reach the underworld which is underneath the earth."¹⁶⁴ In short, Oceanus is the conduit through which souls pass in order to enter the underworld. This is a process clearly stipulated elsewhere in Homer; namely, when Odysseus crosses the Ocean on his way to and from the underworld and when the souls of the suitors also first pass Oceanus when descending to Hades.¹⁶⁵ What is central to this paper, however, is that Nagy draws a close parallel between the role of Oceanus and the cycle of the sun as pathways to the underworld.

For the sun itself, Okeanos has an analogous function: when the sun reaches the extreme west at sunset, it likewise drops into the Okeanos; before the sun rises in the extreme east, it stays hidden underneath the earth. When the sun does rise, it emerges from the Okeanos.¹⁶⁶

Furthermore, he connects both again to the cosmic narrative of returning to life, which he attributes to the *Odyssey* story: "thus the movements of the sun into and from the Okeanos serve as a cosmic model for death and rebirth."¹⁶⁷ Just as, for Heraclitus, Oceanus represents the resolution of things that die "into the constituents from which it grew."¹⁶⁸

These factors, among others not examined in this paper, combine to lead Nagy toward the conclusion that "the entire plot of Odysseus' travels is interlaced with a diction that otherwise connotes the theme of sunset followed by sunrise. To put it more bluntly, the epic plot of Odysseus' travels operates on an extended solar metaphor."¹⁶⁹ This interpretation of both Nagy and Frame clearly demonstrates a continuation of the ancient tradition – presented above – that awards the Homeric texts – specifically the *Odyssey* –

161 Hom. *Od.* 20.61–20.65 (translation by the author).

162 As implied by the adjective ἀψοππόου in l.65.

163 Hom. *Od.* 13.103.

164 Nagy 1990a, 246.

165 Hom. *Od.* 11.13, 12.1, 24.11.

166 Nagy 1990a, 246 (citing Hom. *Il.* 7.421–423 and Hom. *Od.* 19.433).

167 Nagy 1990a, 246.

168 Heraclitus *Homeric Problems*: 22.

169 Nagy 1990a, 225.

with cosmic allegorical significance. This allegorical reading of Homer, as we have seen, also frequently lends itself to a spiritual one, inasmuch as the cosmic cycle is inherently associated with the transmigration of souls in pagan beliefs. It is clear that Nagy is not motivated by Porphyry's philosophical leanings, or a Mithraist's soteriological concerns. Rather, Nagy is following what he believes to be a linguistic interpretation that reaches conclusions based in comparative mythology.

Yet, the results are the same. It seems clear from this brief survey alone that the tradition of Homeric allegorical interpretation, which has now spanned some 26 centuries, is one intimately concerned with the role of the cosmos in the journeys of people and their souls. It is hoped that further examination of this topic may provide insight as to why Homer's texts in particular elicit such 'universal' appraisal.

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